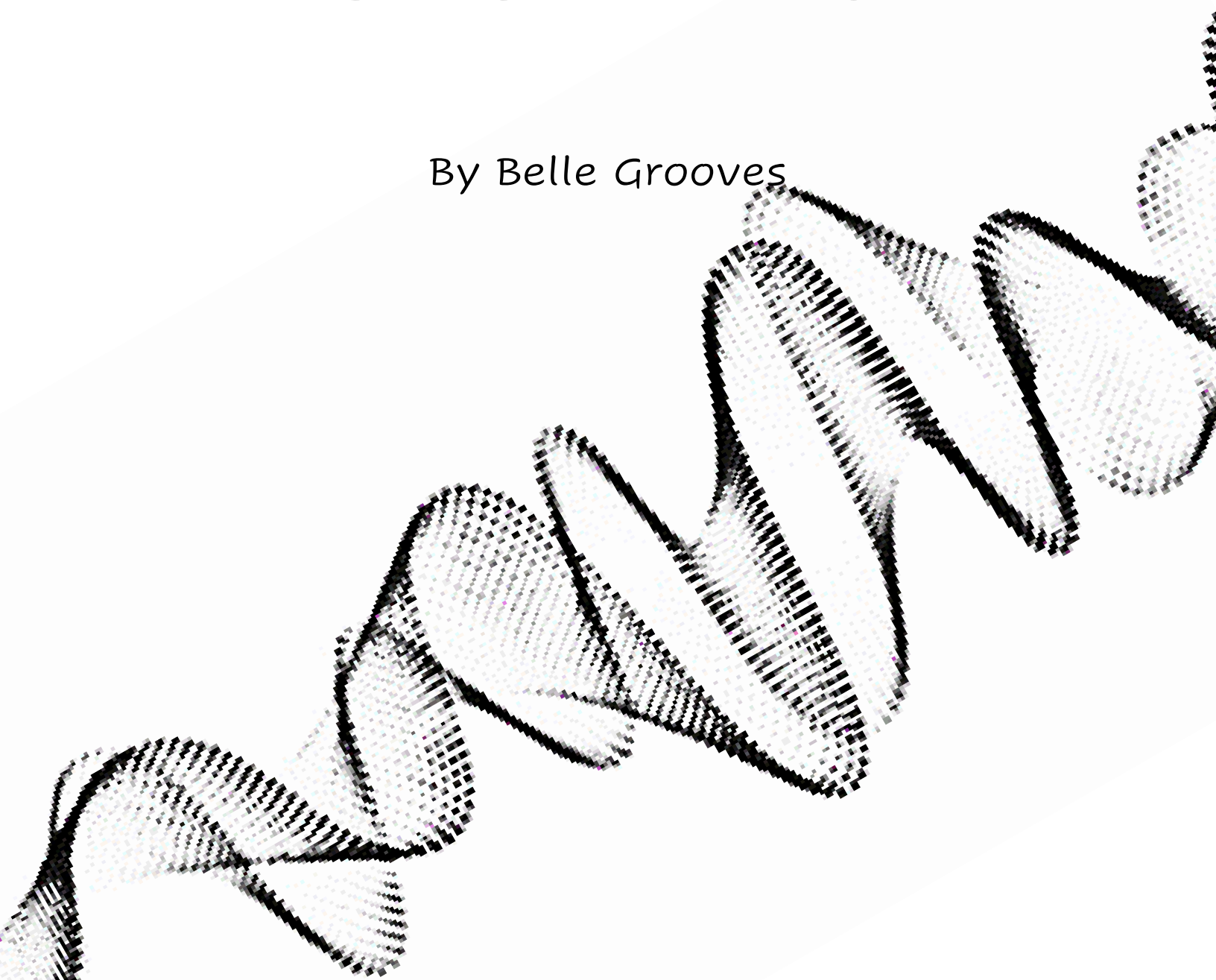


Rocka



# ECHO

By Belle Grooves



For my wonderful mother, who encouraged me and who lifted my  
spirits. Always.

# BEFORE

*The white wolf nimbly bounded into his hiding hole and howled. The noise echoed off the concrete walls, making it ten times louder. He kept a close eye on the humans who wandered into his home, the intruders. The wolf always watched the boy and his brother closely, making sure they'd be able to escape his chamber when they stumbled upon it one day. He allowed their father to see him, but he wouldn't lead their father out if he became trapped in the wolf's chamber...*

There are some things in this world that people never dare speak of. Things that terrify them into never speaking again. Things like the hidden Echo Chamber that nobody has ever returned from...

Anthony Bones was someone who very much believed such things. At the age of six, the stories were more frightening to him than to an adult who knew better than to believe such silly fantasies. And Terrance only improved his little brother's worst suspicions.

"They say the chamber drives you insane. Listening to your voice, breath, and racing heart echo over and over and over. Enhanced by the giant concrete room. And not a soul has ever come back from the Echo Chamber..."

Then Mrs. Bones would scold him for scaring his younger brother. But that didn't, *couldn't*, prevent Anthony from shivering under his covers at night. Jumping every time his voice echoed. Every time his brother taunted him with fake echoes. Every time he heard whispers in the shadows. He was always frightened when he was alone, so he'd crawl into his brother's bed at night and sleep with him. Tonight, was one such night.

Anthony nearly fell off his bed when he heard a wolf howl outside his rattling window. He wrapped himself in covers and calmed his breathing, reminding himself it was only an animal, nothing more. But it continued howling, getting quieter and quieter, much like an echo. He climbed out of bed and crept into Terrance's room. Anthony's brother didn't mind him sleeping there, but it could sometimes be quite bothersome. As Anthony was covering himself, Terrance awoke and faced his little brother. His curly brown hair sticking up in odd places, his dinosaur pajamas, and the terror in his big brown eyes. Anthony just stared at Terrance and waited to see what he'd do.

"Someday you'll have to get over your fears, Anthony," Terrance whispered.

"Not tonight, though. My room is scary. Please can I sleep with you?" Anthony whispered in reply.

"Why don't you ever sleep with Mom and Dad?"

"Because Mommy doesn't like it much. She always sends me back out."

"Well, perhaps you should try again."

"But then I'll have to go back to *my* room!" Anthony's eyes were brimmed with tears. "Terrance, please. I promise I won't do it again. Please." The first tear fell upon Anthony's rosy cheeks.

Terrance sighed and wiped away his brother's tears. "I suppose you can sleep with me tonight." He bit his lip, sure he'd regret what he was about to say. "And any night after that, if you like."

That got a smile from Anthony as he covered himself and fell asleep, dreaming of always sleeping in his brother's safe protection.

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Anthony's eyes shot open when his mother's singsong voice echoed its way upstairs to them. He relaxed, a small amount, when he realized it was only a call for breakfast. Then he jumped, literally this time, out of the bed when Terrance placed his hand upon the boy's shoulder.

"Relax, it's only me." Terrance knelt before his brother to look him in the eyes. "Listen, I'm sorry about last night. I shouldn't have asked you to go somewhere else. I know how you are with sounds, with echoes."

Anthony only nodded and followed his brother downstairs, where the delicious aroma of freshly baked chocolate chip muffins filled their noses.

Mrs. Bones was placing three muffins each on two plates for her boys, humming a tune and looking beautiful as ever. Her auburn hair fell in long waves down her back. And her hazel eyes shone with happiness upon seeing her two boys. But she noticed Anthony's restless look when she served them their muffins. If Terrance would only stop with those stories about the Echo Chamber, her youngest would rest much more easily.

She sat beside Anthony and brushed his hair off his forehead. "Did you sleep with your brother again?"

"Mmm-hmm," he replied with a mouth full of food. She asked him that most mornings, though he wasn't sure why. When he swallowed, he asked, "Mother, where's Daddy?"

Terrance noticed his mother's pained expression when she turned away to answer. Their father was a man who found joy in traveling and discovering new things. Or things people said were legends. But often, danger followed his job. Things like collapses, toxins, explosions gone wrong. He had made it his life's goal to discover the Echo Chamber and come home to tell his family about every crack, every smooth surface, and every sound. But all Nora Bones thought about was whether he'd return to them that day. Would a messenger bring news of her love's death? Would he find the chamber and never return, like so many others? It was the reason

her expression was pained now, and every time she spoke about her husband.

She turned back to her boys and offered an encouraging smile. "He left early this morning to get a head start. He's not... He won't be..." A single tear spilled from her eye, and she turned away again.

"Mom, isn't he coming home for dinner? Like he always does?" Terrance asked.

"No, honey, he's not. He said he won't return until he's found the chamber. And he said when he finds it, he'll send us a letter." Tears trailed down her cheeks like miniature waterfalls.

Anthony suddenly lost his appetite. His father wouldn't return until he'd discovered the Echo Chamber. And nobody had ever returned from that place, well, that's what Terrance told him. That meant... Oh no.

Anthony gripped his brother's arm, eyes wide. "But if he finds the chamber he won't ever come home! Nobody has come back from that place! He can't go looking for it!"

"Of course he'll come home, Anthony. There's nothing to worry about. Promise."

"But that's not true. He'll go crazy because of the echoes! How will he come back, Terrance? How?"

Terrance pulled his arm free of his brother's death grip and placed firm hands on Anthony's shoulders. "Anthony, those were only stories. I'm sure there's at least one person who's come back from the chamber. And Father will come back too. I know he will. He has to." Terrance blinked away tears. "And when he does come home, we'll be waiting for him on those steps outside. And he'll tell you all the stories about the real Echo Chamber. Just as he promised."

Mrs. Bones smiled and held each of her boys' hands. "I think it's time for some chores. Put your things away and go about the day as you would any other day." She kissed their heads and wet a rag to clean the counters.

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Anthony sulked outside after cleaning his room, sweeping the floors, and dusting various areas. But he hadn't been focused on the tasks at hand, only one thought begged to be answered: *would Father come home?* He thought of everything his brother had told him about the Echo Chamber, whether stories or truth, and deduced that his father could not possibly find the chamber *and* come home. Even if he found the chamber and somehow didn't get lost in there forever,

he would surely go insane and return as a madman. And Anthony couldn't dismiss the possibility that everyone could still be alive, somehow, and insane down there. They could be violent. But the latter was by far the most improbable. Anthony doubted if anyone could survive down there for more than a few days. Much less years.

And then the tears came. Even as young as he was, Anthony was smart enough to know that his father likely was never coming home again. He ran into the woods to be alone and away from everything. He didn't want his mother to pretend everything would be okay and hide her own sorrow. He didn't want Terrance to tell him more stories about the Echo Chamber and say he promised Father would return. How could he possibly make that promise? He was wrong to believe he could keep it. Nobody could bring their father home except God. And Anthony was beginning to have doubts in that God. How was it possible that someone he couldn't even see was able to bring his father home? His mother had always taught him to have faith in Jesus, but Anthony found that difficult when his father's life was involved. Why didn't anything make sense anymore?

He climbed into his old treehouse and scooted into a corner. He'd never been there alone, but now it made him scared. The harsh breeze shook the old wood and rattled the remnants of the window. Branches scratched the hard surface and made horrible screeching noises. And worse still were the echoing owl cries. *Whooooo-whooo-whoo-who*. Anthony was frightened as he'd never been before. His heart almost pounded out of his chest and his tears streamed more fiercely than before. When he heard the rustling of leaves below him, he quite nearly passed out in terror. He wrapped his arms around his legs and laid his head against his knees.

"I thought I'd find you up here," a gentle voice whispered. Anthony collapsed into his brother's embrace and sobbed. Terrance held his little brother until he was calm. He understood what Anthony was going through, more than he knew how to put into words.

"I know this is hard, Anthony, but everything will be okay. It will always be okay as long as we trust God." Terrance wrapped his arms tighter around his shivering brother. "Do you believe God will return our father to us the way he was before he left?"

Anthony thought about that. Did he really think God, someone he had grown up being told to have faith in, could bring their father home? If he didn't have faith in anything, then all hope was lost. He nodded.

"And do you believe the stories I told you about the Echo Chamber?"

Anthony nodded without hesitation this time; he'd also grown up hearing those tales.

"Then if you trust that God will deliver Father home safely from the chamber, it will be so. But you must really believe all that in your heart. Do you?"

Anthony looked up at his brother's somber face. His wet blue eyes and disheveled brown hair. And he knew in his heart that Terrance was right. "Yes, Terrance. I do."

Then Anthony felt a calmness about him, lying against his big brother. It was like a sort of peace in his heart, a warmth that only grew. He closed his eyes to rest, the exhaustion of missed sleep finally catching up to him.

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Anthony awoke to see the sun floating high in the middle of the bright blue sky. The shining green leaves glistening and swaying in the warm and gentle breeze. He heard the birds sing their afternoon greetings to one another. And then reality came crashing down. About their father and the chamber.

Anthony groggily sat up and rubbed his eyes, remembering having fallen asleep with Terrance in their treehouse. But his brother was still fast asleep. Anthony wondered briefly if he should try to find his father before it was too late. He quickly realized how futile that idea was. Then they'd both be trapped in the chamber forever... Unless there was a way out. No. If there was, someone surely would've found it by now. Wouldn't they? He shook his head to clear his thoughts.

Then Anthony froze in place when he saw a creature of terrible beauty. He seemed to glow white, wrapped in a blanket of purest snow. His pointed ears twitched at every miniscule sound and his keen eyes followed even the slightest of movements. His piercing ice blue eyes gazed deep into Anthony's soul. Then the magnificent animal bounded away, glancing at the boy only once.

Anthony let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and shook his brother awake. Terrance glanced around until his gaze landed on his brother's frantic eyes. He seemed almost out of breath. And he was speaking rapidly.

"A wolf! Terrance, I saw a white wolf run that way! He looked right at me! What does that mean? Why is he here?"

"Anthony, take a deep breath." Terrance pushed himself to a more comfortable position and waited for his brother to calm down. "Now, what's this about a wolf?"

"A white wolf with blue eyes. He was watching me and then he ran away. Terrance, what does that mean? How come he was here, in our woods?"

"I'm not sure. Why didn't you wake me?" There was an edge to Terrance's voice when he spoke. As though it was Anthony's fault that he'd missed the wolf.

"I didn't want to disturb him and make him run away. And he was... mesmerizing. I couldn't look away."

Terrance stared at the spot where the wolf had been only moments before. "Let's go inside, Anthony."

They climbed down the ladder and started for the house, but Anthony paused halfway there. He turned to look behind him and saw the wolf, staring right through him with those icy eyes. It began strutting toward the boy but stopped when it sensed danger. The magnificent creature bounded into the woods, leaving a stunned little boy behind.

"Anthony? What's the hold up?" Terrance asked, following his brother's gaze.

"The wolf. He was walking to me, but he ran away. How come I keep seeing that wolf, Terrance?"

"I'm not quite sure. Maybe he knows something..." Terrance's voice drifted off as he wondered why his little brother kept seeing that gloriously white wolf.

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Anthony didn't talk much during lunchtime, as he was quite distracted by the wolf. Why did he keep seeing it and not his brother? Why did it seem to stare into his soul? And how was he so beautifully white? One would think that a wolf who hunted and ate wild meat would be rather dirty, but not this wolf. He was so perfectly clean. Anthony imagined he must have come from far away, a place full of snow and not forests.

Then he thought if he saw the wolf again, he wanted to call it something. A name could tell you who the creature was or wasn't. It was full of meaning that described the being with the title. He thought Daniel might work, but that was too... human. Perhaps a dog name like Gus or Max, but that was still wrong. The wolf needed a name that would fit with his personality and looks. And the perfect

title came to Anthony in his thoughts. A name he thought the wolf was well deserving of.

"Verne BudWhite!" he exclaimed suddenly, finishing a grilled cheese sandwich.

"What? Verne BudWhite? Anthony, what are you going on about?" Mrs. Bones asked.

"The wolf, Mom. His name is Verne. If I see him again, he'll be called Verne." Anthony rather liked the sound and taste of that name on his tongue. It felt *right*. As if that was really the wolf's name.

"That's a good name you gave him, Anthony. But what if next time you see him, you're alone? What if he attacks you?" Terrance questioned.

"Well, I won't be alone. Being alone is scary. I hear things like echoes. And I remember the stories of the Echo Chamber. I think of what will happen to Daddy if he finds it. He won't ever come home."

Terrance glanced at his mother and saw the sadness in her eyes. The sorrow she tried so hard to hide for the benefit of her children, but he knew. He knew how she felt and knew it was painful in a way only someone who knew love could feel. Like a tightening of the heart, restricting your breathing. And Terrance knew it could only be awful to feel that.

"Of course he will! Don't talk like that, Anthony. He knows what he's doing, and everything will be perfect, you'll see. Remember what I told you in the treehouse. Jesus will deliver Father home. He always does and He will this time. And we'll be waiting, just like I told you." Terrance reassured.

"Boys. Your father loves you dearly and will do whatever it takes to come back to us. I promise you that." Mrs. Bones added.

"What if that's not enough?" Anthony asked.

"It has to be." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Her boys nodded solemnly, knowing in their hearts that the chances of Peter Bones returning were beyond slim. At best he'd come home as a madman, or not at all. They'd never find him or know what truly became of him, and that was a mind-numbing thought. But they kept praying for him. Pleading with God to bring home their beloved father and much-loved husband.

Anthony and Terrance waited on the steps every day for their father. For his letter. For anything that would confirm his life. But nothing ever came. Except Verne. Anthony saw him far back in the woods, watching. Perhaps waiting for something, but Anthony didn't know what. Or why the wolf only allowed him and not his brother to

see it. But Anthony never questioned those things. His mind was always on his father. Wondering if the letter would arrive today or tomorrow. In a week or a month. A year or decade. Eventually he would fall asleep in Terrance's lap, awakening from nightmares of the Echo Chamber.

+ + +

Anthony startled awake when Terrance shook his shoulders. He looked around at their dull backyard before turning to his brother. Terrance's eyes gleamed with mischief.

"I haven't told you any stories in a while. Do you want to hear a new one?" he asked innocently.

"A new one? But you've told me lots already."

"Not this one." Terrance crossed his legs and faced Anthony, preparing for one of many stories in his head. "They say an old man once stumbled upon the Echo Chamber as he was going on a stroll. He didn't even have time to scream before the ground swallowed him up. He landed, of course, in the chamber. His gasps of fear echoed across every concrete wall. His rapid heartbeats pounded in his head. Every footstep resembled that of an elephant. His eyes blind in the darkness. Children missed their grandfather. A wife cried for her love. But..." Terrance paused for effect. "He came out. The old man returned to his family, and they cried happy tears. Until they realized what it had done to him." This time he waited for his little brother to ask the inevitable question.

"What did it do?" Anthony asked with eyes as big as saucers.

"He was crazy. He didn't remember any of his family. He constantly mumbled things and echoed them with his own voice. He died a week after coming home. They say it was from pure terror."

"But will that happen to Father?"

Terrance sighed, realizing it would've been a wise decision to keep that story to himself. "I don't know what will happen to Father, but he'll come home. He won't be crazy, but he might be hurt. Maybe he'll be blinded by the darkness forever. Or he'll always hear echoes where there aren't. But we must have faith, Anthony. Never lose your faith. Promise?"

"Promise." Anthony's gaze drifted toward the woods, where he'd seen Verne BudWhite resting so often now. But this time when Terrance followed his brother's eyes, he drew in a sharp gasp.

He saw Verne resting his head on his front legs and licking his paw. He saw the startlingly blue eyes. The fur of purest white. He

seemed to glow with the beauty he knew was his. It was a wonderful sight. Then he vanished, prancing deeper into the woods.

"I saw him, Anthony! I saw Verne this time!" Terrance exclaimed.

"He's beautiful." Anthony whispered.

"Yes. Verne is a splendid animal."

"We should follow him next time, Terrance. We should see where he goes when he needs to sleep at night. See his home." There was a hint of wistfulness in Anthony's voice.

Terrance looked up at the purple, pink, and orange sky. The golden clouds drifting away. The red sun sinking into the earth. Then he looked into his brother's big brown eyes, still staring after Verne. He saw longing, fear, and tiredness there. Feelings he often felt battling inside his own head.

"I think it's time for us to sleep now, Anthony." Terrance whispered after a time. But his brother was already asleep. Terrance smiled and carried the sleeping boy inside, into the comfort he so loved. And never wanted to abandon.

+ + +

Anthony dreamed of following Verne into his world. The world he surely came from, full of snow laden trees and hills. With snowflakes drifting to the white blanketed ground. He dreamed that not even the wolf's howl frightened him. That there were no echoes for as far as one could hear, but something *did* scare the boy. When he looked into Verne's eyes, he saw his father falling into the ground below him. It was as if he'd fallen into an invisible hole. Anthony ran after Verne in his dream, but the wolf was much too quick for him. He kept racing, determined to find his father and bring him home. Then he fell into a hole that he couldn't see, and everything became impenetrably dark.

Anthony's eyes shot open, and his heart raced. He knew, of course, that it had been simply a dream, but it still worried the boy. He wondered if that's how people got trapped in the Echo Chamber, by falling into a hole they could not see. But could Verne see it? Did he know when people fell into the chamber? Anthony didn't see how that made sense, but he couldn't argue that it was impossible either. Perhaps it was all because of Verne...

"What are you staring at?" Terrance asked, watching his brother closely.

"I was thinking about Verne and what he might have to do with

the chamber. Do you think it's possible he has anything to do with the chamber?"

"No. I mean, what brought you to that sudden idea? Why would he have something to do with the Echo Chamber?" Terrance questioned.

Anthony explained his dream to his brother and Terrance listened intently to grasp every detail. The world made of snow, the brave Anthony, and no echoes whatsoever. Their falling father in Verne's gaze and Anthony's chase. And then the sudden darkness. After getting all the facts, it did seem possible that Verne BudWhite might know a little something about the chamber. Seeing as he led Anthony into a dark place and showed him their father falling through the ground.

"When you fell into the invisible hole, was it the chamber?" Terrance asked.

Anthony shrugged. "I guess it could've been, but I didn't hear any echoes."

"Well, that's because you woke up right when you fell into the hole. Maybe we should follow Verne and see where he leads us."

Anthony's eyes widened. "But what if he leads us straight into the Echo Chamber?"

"Then we'll know it's real and we'll find out what becomes of those who enter it and never return."

"Then we'll never come back either, Terrance! We won't see Mom or Dad ever again! I don't like this idea."

"It was your suggestion in the first place! If you don't want to go tomorrow, then fine! I'll go by myself!"

"Then I won't have a big brother!"

"No, you won't. Not unless you come with me."

"I can't!"

"Fine! I don't need you anyway!" Terrance bounded up the stairs and slammed his bedroom door.

A tear trailed down Anthony's face. He never argued with his brother, yet that's exactly what had just happened. Now he wasn't sure he'd ever see his brother again, or if Terrance even still loved him. He wouldn't have a big brother to sleep with when he was frightened. Or someone to tell him scary stories about the Echo Chamber. He would never see Terrance again if he left without Anthony.

The boy's tears were running down his cheeks as he climbed upstairs and sat heavily on his bed. He didn't know what to do or if

there even *was* something he could do. Would Terrance forgive him? Would he hate Anthony for disagreeing to go? Would he even tell his little brother goodbye? Anthony let out a sob as he realized how much his life would change forever without his brother or father. It would be rather depressing. And their poor mother would certainly be devastated. If both became victims of the Echo Chamber, they'd likely never be seen again.

Anthony knocked on his brother's door in hopes of convincing him to stay. When nobody opened it, Anthony pushed open the door and walked into Terrance's room. His brother was sitting on his bed and staring out the window, oblivious to the little boy who'd entered without invitation.

"Terrance?" Anthony whispered, scared of what his brother might do.

Terrance turned away from the swaying trees and shining sun outside his window and looked at his brother. His eyelashes were wet from crying. His eyes red and puffy. He looked miserable and smaller than usual. But Terrance crossed the floor to Anthony and hugged him tightly.

"Forgive me." He whispered. "I should never have said I didn't need you because I do." Then a verse came to his mind that he thought was perfectly fitting for this very situation, and he whispered it into his brother's ear. "'If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.' Matthew 18:15."

Anthony smiled slightly as he pulled away from Terrance, but it quickly faded when he remembered that his brother was planning to leave for the Echo Chamber. "You can't go, Terrance. I don't want you to be gone forever. Please, stay here where it's safe."

"I must go, Anthony. I need to find Father and bring him home. Verne will lead me there. I'll come back. I'll always come back to you."

"But you can't leave me!" Anthony cried. "Terrance, please."

Terrance wiped away his brother's tears, but more flowed down the boy's rosy cheeks. "Come with me, Anthony. We can go together, like you wanted to the other day. We can follow Verne BudWhite and see where he takes us. It will be an adventure."

"What about Mommy? She'll be alone and sad."

"We'll leave her a note."

"We can't leave yet Terrance! Let's wait until Father's letter gets here."

Terrance bit his lip. "Okay, we'll wait. But after that we must follow the wolf! And we'll be together, Anthony. Always."

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They waited on those little stone steps day after day after day. No letter ever arrived. No mail was sent to them concerning their father. No messenger saying he'd fallen prey to the Echo Chamber. Nothing. But still they waited, never losing faith that one day someday a note would come saying their father had discovered the chamber and was alive. And then the boys would chase after Verne until he led them to their father.

It was on an exceptionally hot and humid afternoon as the boys were sitting on the warm steps, when Anthony finally burst. The hotness and his deepening despair and hopelessness exploded inside him.

"This is ridiculous! Nobody's coming! No letter has arrived! And I doubt that one ever will! Can't we just go inside and wait? It's so hot, Terrance. If something or someone was coming, don't you think it would've already come?" he exclaimed.

Terrance sighed, having gone through this routine at least three times already with his little brother. "We must wait until Father's letter comes, Anthony. I know it seems like forever, but I promise something will come soon. Really, I can feel it."

Anthony returned to his seat, leaning on his brother's sweaty shoulder. "Sorry. I just want something fun and interesting to happen. Sitting here every day is boring. Please, can we play a game?"

"Yes, all right. We shall play a game of hide-and-seek. That's easy enough and doesn't take much time, lest we miss something important." Terrance nudged his brother to get a move on. "I'll count to thirty."

Anthony ran to the back of the house and looked around for somewhere to hide. He thought about the old broken shed, but he usually hid there. Then there was the giant box for... well, no one really knew *what* it was for. His only other options were the woods or the treehouse, but both were frightening when he was alone. At last, Anthony spotted a large tree at the edge of the forest and hid behind it.

He waited for Terrance to call that he was ready, only he never did. Anthony waited behind the tree for what felt like hours. His brother wasn't one to leave Anthony without any explanation at all, but that seemed to be exactly what was happening this very

moment. Anthony gave up and went back to the steps, hoping for an answer from his brother. But Terrance wasn't sitting on the steps anymore. He didn't appear to be anywhere near the little stone stairs. Anthony looked around frantically, feeling abandoned and terrified.

"Terrance! Where are you?!" he screamed into the forest, but there was no reply.

Anthony thought he might've gone to the treehouse to search, and he ran in that direction. He climbed into the little hut, and it was empty. He searched from the roofless top, hoping to get a better view of the property and forest. His brother was nowhere that he could see. Anthony felt hot tears coming and he slumped to his knees. Why had Terrance left him like that? Had something happened to him? Was he, perhaps, injured somewhere in the woods? But surely he would answer Anthony's calls if that were the case...?

"Oh, Terrance. Where could you have gone?" Anthony sobbed. "Why did you leave me alone when you promised we'd always be together? Don't you love me?" These were the sorts of questions bobbing around in Anthony's little head. He assumed the worst, naturally.

"'Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.' Hebrews 11:1." Terrance wrapped his arms around his little brother. "Forgive me. I didn't leave you on purpose. I'd never leave you on purpose and without explanation."

Anthony leaned into his brother's protective and safe embrace. He whispered, "Then what kept you from me?"

Terrance bit his lip. "Verne. He... got a bit mad at me. I'm not sure why. He did bite me, but it's nothing really."

"Didn't you ask Mother to look at it?"

"Finding you was more important than any scratch. What if he came for you?"

That was when Anthony noticed his brother's hand was tightly grasped in the other. He pulled them away from the embrace and faced Terrance. "Your hand?"

Terrance reluctantly held out his shaking left hand for Anthony to see. There were clear bite marks there, but a surprisingly little amount of blood.

"Does it hurt?" Anthony asked, worried for his brother.

Terrance smiled at that. "Not enough for me to stop waiting for Father. Not enough for me to give up *saving* our father. And certainly not enough to keep me from staying with you. So, no. I suppose it

doesn't hurt badly."

Anthony smiled too and followed his brother inside. Terrance had at least agreed to let their mother tend to it. They made sure to keep an eye out for Verne BudWhite, wary of what he might do given the chance. But he didn't appear. The boys wouldn't forget his sort of warning though. Ever.

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"What's happened to your hand, Terrance?" Nora exclaimed when he laid it on the counter for her to examine.

"Verne bit me. But it's not terrible."

"How come it isn't bleeding more?" she wondered.

"I'm not quite sure I know the answer to that, Mother."

"It's because Verne didn't want to hurt you. He wanted to warn you." Anthony explained, surprising himself with the information. But it made sense. If the wolf had wanted to injure Terrance, he'd no longer have a hand. Verne had only meant the bite as a warning. Though the reason remained to be seen.

"All right. I'll just wrap it in a bandage and send you off." Mrs. Bones decided.

Anthony sat by, watching his mother as she wound a cloth bandage round his brother's hand. Terrance didn't appear to be in any pain, but Anthony sensed it hurt *some*. After all, Terrance had never admitted to it not hurting at all.

"Shall we go wait by the steps?" Terrance suggested when his hand was wrapped.

Anthony nodded and followed his brother back outside. Their father would surely send them a note soon. Or something that proved he was alive. Maybe he'd come home to them after so many days.

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Anthony was in his room sleeping by himself for once. Tonight, he hadn't heard anything scary. He hadn't needed his brother's protection. No echoes drifted through his window. No wolf howled. Anthony didn't hear any sound, in fact. He heard his own breathing, beginning to quicken. He felt his heart thrumming behind his ribcage. But nothing else.

He opened his eyes and listened carefully, waiting for a sound to echo into his room. Any sound that confirmed there was life in this house. He didn't hear Terrance's snoring behind the wall. He

didn't hear their mother's soft music before bed. Anthony only heard his breath echoed across the room.

He rushed into his brother's room and started shaking Terrance, needing his magical words of comfort. His brother would always protect him.

"Terrance!" Anthony whispered desperately. "Wake up!" But his brother wouldn't wake.

That's when Anthony shot up in his bed. He was alone in his room, like in his dream. Anthony scrambled out of his bed and climbed into his brother's. Terrance was asleep, but he seemed to be breathing. Anthony shook his shoulders until Terrance was facing him.

"What?" he hissed.

Anthony began to breathe more easily. "You weren't waking up, Terrance. In my dream you didn't wake up."

"Nonsense. I wouldn't die without telling you first."

"But--"

"Hush." Terrance whispered. "Let's sleep now."

Anthony laid his head next to his brother's and pulled the covers up to his chin. Terrance would never leave without telling his brother first. That comforting thought was what finally allowed Anthony some peace and rest.

Anthony awoke to an echo of his name.

"Anthony-thony-ony..."

His eyes searched the entire room, until they landed on his big brother's smug face.

"Terrance! That's horrible." Anthony said.

"I had to get you awake somehow. Besides, we need to wait on the steps."

They wandered outside to the steps and sat down. Both praying that today was finally the day something arrived about their father. Either a letter, messenger, or *anything* would do. They only wanted assurance that their father was alive and well.

"'And he arose and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.' Luke 15:20." Terrance said. "God will deliver Father home because He loves us. You must remember these things, Anthony, as you grow older. You must never lose faith in God, for you will suffer. But love Him and He will love you."

"How can you be sure, Terrance? How do you know God will bring Daddy home?"

"I know because I believe in God. If I have faith in Him, then I know He'll protect us and bring our father home."

Anthony nodded, knowing in his heart that no more needed to be said. Knowing that his brother was right, and everything would be as God wanted it to be. Knowing that He would do what was best and what was right. Knowing that without Jesus, one would surely lead a miserable life. Anthony believed all this in his heart and knew it would be so.

He wondered if God had sent Verne BudWhite to the earth knowing that he'd watch Anthony and his brother closely. And if He knew what he and his brother were planning to do. But of course He knew, because God knows all.

"Terrance, what do you suppose that is?" Anthony suddenly asked, staring into the forest.

Terrance followed his brother's gaze and squinted his eyes to see better. What he saw stunned him. It was a man with wild brown hair and a handsome beard and mustache. A man Terrance knew to have brown eyes. The man married to their mother. He was Peter Bones. He was their father.

Terrance jumped to his feet and waved his arms. "Father! Father!" Then he grabbed Anthony's hand and pulled him to their father.

Peter's arms opened wide to embrace his boys. How he'd missed them over the past weeks. He didn't want to let them go, never again. His eyes drifted toward the door of his home when it was pushed open. Standing in the doorway was his wife, his love. Peter let his boys go and swung Nora in his arms as tears spilled from her eyes. He kissed her many times and kept his arm tightly around her.

And he whispered the same two words over and over, wanting her to trust her eyes and ears. "I'm here."

+ + +

"I arrived to work early and alone. None of my guys were there yet, so I headed into the woods for a short walk. But then I saw a most amazing creature." Peter's eyes were glazed and distant as he lost himself in the memory. "His fur was white as the heavens themselves. His eyes icy blue and soulful. The wolf seemed to stare straight through me as I gazed at his beauty. I followed him deeper into the forest, unable to stop myself. He never slowed or looked back, but I knew he knew I was following him. The wolf went far ahead of me and disappeared. When I returned to the work area, my

men were already doing their jobs. I joined them and didn't see the wolf another time after that. Not even a glimpse." Peter shook his head in dismay about never seeing the splendid creature again. "I finally gave up the search after all this time and came home."

"But why were you in our woods, Father?" Terrance asked.

"I thought maybe I'd see the wolf again here, but I didn't. So, I... Oh my!"

"What happened, Daddy?" Anthony wondered.

"I left the motorcycle in the woods!" he exclaimed. Their father started for the door, but Anthony stopped him.

"You were talking about Verne, Daddy. That wolf you saw, that was him. He lives in our woods."

"Verne? You've given him a name? You must tell me all about him. Come, let's sit."

Anthony explained to his father the first time he saw Verne BudWhite from the treehouse. The second time when the wolf almost caught up with him. The times Verne had been resting in the woods, watching him with those ice blue eyes. And the last time when Terrance had finally seen him too. Then Anthony let his brother tell them about how Verne snuck up on him and bit his hand. And how he thought it had only been a sort of warning to the boys. Finally, Anthony told his father about the dream he'd had with the vision in the wolf's eyes and the darkness. All the while, Peter sat quietly and listened to every detail his boys offered. This was a time he never wanted to forget. A memory he'd cherish for the rest of his days.

"And you waited on those steps for me every day?" He asked.

"Yes, Father. We wanted to see you when you came home or receive your letter when it arrived." Terrance answered.

"Ah, the letter. I never sent one because I never found the Echo Chamber." Mr. Bones' voice contained a hint of sadness and regret, but only those who knew him best would've detected the change in his tone. "I decided to give up after a time. When I didn't see Verne again, I knew in the back of my mind that I wouldn't find the chamber. After weeks without seeing him again, I knew it was time to come home. Perhaps I'll never find the chamber. Perhaps it's for the best."

+ + +

Anthony was sitting in his treehouse with Terrance after bringing the motorcycle home. Their father had left it far back in the woods, and Verne had been looking after it. When they found it, the

wolf was resting beside it, as though he'd been expecting the Bones to arrive. But he hadn't stayed long.

In the treehouse, the boys were eating their lunch and laughing together. Both of them rejoicing about their father being safely home. Terrance telling Anthony that he knew all along their father would come home to them. Though Anthony laughed with his brother, his thoughts were scattered and distracting. He wondered why Verne lived in their woods. Why he always seemed to be watching the boys, waiting for something to happen. And Anthony wondered why the wolf had bitten Terrance's hand, but only as a warning. None of these things made sense to him, but perhaps his brother could help.

"Why does Verne BudWhite live in *our* woods, Terrance? Can't he live anywhere he likes?"

"I suppose he could, but maybe he has a family in his home. He probably doesn't want to leave them behind. Or he doesn't want to leave the safety of his den." Terrance answered.

"Do you ever think he's watching us?"

Terrance finished his lunch and sat by his brother. He knew Anthony well enough to know when something was bothering him. Something he didn't want to talk about.

"Why?"

Anthony sighed and leaned his head against his brother's arm. "What if Verne was leading Father somewhere, but Daddy wasn't quick enough? If we follow him, we might find out what that place is." Anthony's brown eyes brightened. "We should go after him, Terrance! Like we were going to before Daddy came home."

"But with Father home, there's no need for us to run away. If Dad leaves again, then maybe we'll go. But not now, Anthony. Okay?"

"Daddy won't leave soon though Terrance! We should go right now."

"Listen to me, Anthony. I know I was insistent on going yesterday, but it's different now. The reason we were going to go was because we wanted to save Dad. And now Father's home and doesn't need saving. We don't need to go looking for trouble. Please, trust me."

Anthony turned away from his brother and gazed into the forest. He wanted to know what an adventure was like. What it felt like to be absolutely free. To have a sense of pure happiness and childishness. He wanted to feel that, to feel what he was sure Verne felt. Freedom from the world.

"Okay, Terrance. I'll wait. You're right, it's too dangerous." Anthony smiled at his brother.

"'He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly.' Proverbs 14:29. If you're patient, it will all happen in good time. But if you are irrational and make hasty decisions, it will certainly end badly." Terrance replied.

"I understand." Anthony turned back to the forest in time to see Verne BudWhite running and prancing in the woods. Seeming to be having the time of his life.

Terrance stood and pulled his little brother up with him. "There are other ways to have adventure, you know. Come with me to my room and I'll show you."

+ + +

After spending the rest of the day running and pretending with his big brother, Anthony was exhausted and fast asleep in Terrance's room. He'd been sleeping better since his father's return, but tonight was restless. His dreams were horrid, and his sleep came in fits. No one position was comfortable, and his breathing happened in terrified bursts. At last, Anthony sat up and rested by the window.

He watched bats fly through the night breeze, gliding on their wings. Heard the birds' nighttime lullabies, singing each other and their children to sleep. He saw owls swoop to the ground for a midnight snack, twisting their heads every which way. Anthony's eyes landed on the creature he'd been searching for, the wolf of purest white. Verne sat under the windowsill and rested his head on his paws, glancing at the boy with those piercing eyes. Anthony rested his chin in his hands and gazed into the wolf's eyes. He wanted to ask Verne where he'd been trying to lead his father, but he knew such things as speaking to animals were foolish. Of course the animal wouldn't understand him.

As the boy's eyes were drooping, something in the wolf's eyes flashed. Verne knew it was inevitable, but he wished it weren't. He could only do so much for the boy and his brother. His efforts would not prevent the worst. The wolf shook his head slowly and pranced into the forest.

Terrance shook his brother's shoulders when he found Anthony lying against the windowsill. "What were you doing over here?"

Anthony yawned and looked at Terrance. He remembered climbing out of bed and sitting by the window, but not much after that. "I couldn't sleep in the bed."

"I'm surprised you managed any sleep at all." Terrance started for the stairs, but he turned back to his little brother. "I think Father's going to leave again for work. Come with me and we'll see what he says."

Anthony stood up and tiredly followed Terrance down the steps and into the kitchen where their parents were eating grits and speaking quietly, almost suspiciously. They turned when they heard their boys coming downstairs. Anthony and Terrance plopped into seats across from their mother and father.

"I've got to leave again for work, but I won't go looking for the chamber. It's only to see if my men have found something. And I can't abandon my work." Mr. Bones explained.

"How long will you be gone?" Terrance asked.

Peter glanced at his wife with an uncertain expression. "I'm not sure. Maybe a few weeks again. But I promise to come home." He tried for a smile.

Anthony looked at his brother with a question in his eyes. Terrance met his brother's gaze and winked. Anthony smiled and laid his head on the countertop. He was barely able to keep his eyes open when his mother asked the question she always asked.

"Anthony, did you sleep in Terrance's room again?" she asked.

"Yep. My room is too scary and too dark. The window rattles and I hear echoes. But Terrance's room is safe, and he can protect me."

Nora smiled, but her eyes betrayed her worry. She followed her husband upstairs to prepare, leaving the two boys in the kitchen.

Anthony was barely able to stay awake as he followed Terrance back into his room. They sat on the floor, Terrance's legs crossed, and Anthony's entire weight supported by the bed behind him.

"Since Father is leaving, we can too. Anthony, this is our chance to follow Verne and go on an adventure! We could leave today if you like." Terrance could hardly contain his excitement.

Anthony looked at his brother with tired eyes and shook his head. "I'm so tired, Terrance."

"Didn't you sleep at all?"

"Only a little." Anthony's head fell against the bed.

"Maybe if you stopped having nightmares, you'd be able to fall asleep."

"No, Terrance. I can't stop the nightmares from happening. It's horrible." Then Anthony's entire body slumped with exhaustion.

Terrance lifted his little brother into his bed and covered him

with soft blankets. He turned out the lights, but he didn't leave. He knew it would frighten Anthony if he awoke alone in his brother's room. Terrance sat on the bed beside his brother, allowing sleep to take him as well.

It only seemed like seconds had passed when the light was turned on. Terrance lifted his head from the bed pole it had been leaning against. Anthony didn't open his eyes; he pulled the covers over his face and fell asleep again. But when Terrance realized why they'd been awakened in the first place, he pulled the covers off his brother and shook him awake.

"Anthony, Father's leaving. Don't you want to tell him goodbye?"

Anthony reluctantly opened his eyes and sat up. Standing in the doorway were his parents, both looking grim. He noticed his father wearing old clothes, clothes he saved for his work. And he noticed his mother's tearful expression. Anthony tiredly scooted off the bed and hugged his father.

"I'll come back, Anthony. In only a few weeks. All right?" Mr. Bones said with a falsely cheerful tone.

"Okay." The boy whispered, already struggling to keep his eyes open.

Terrance embraced his father and avoided his mother's gaze, knowing it would bring tears to his own eyes. Their father had only just come home from work and now he was leaving again.

"Goodbye, Father."

"Goodbye, my boy. I know you'll look after your brother as you always do." Peter leaned closer to whisper into his son's ear. "'My son, if your heart is wise, then my heart will be glad indeed.' Proverbs 23:15."

The tears sprang to Terrance's eyes. He hugged his father tighter than knelt beside his little brother. He wrapped his arm around Anthony's shoulders, supporting most of the boy's weight.

Mr. Bones only squatted beside his boys and said, "I'll only be gone for a little while, don't worry. And I will always come back to you." Then Peter whisked his wife out of the room and disappeared.

Anthony and Terrance stared at the bedroom entrance for a time after their parents had left. Neither of them turned away until Terrance felt his little brother slump in his arms. Anthony was fast asleep again, with his big brother carrying him back to bed.

+ + +

Anthony saw Verne racing through the forest in his mind's eye. He saw the bushy white tail and glowing fur. The wolf only glancing back once to make sure Anthony was still following. The boy continued to chase Verne until the wolf disappeared. Anthony came to a halt and frantically searched the area. He had spun in a full three-sixty when it happened. Verne jumped on top of him and bared his razor fangs. A hideous snarl from the creature he thought had been protecting him. As the fangs were clamping down, Anthony's world spun, and he was in his brother's bedroom.

Terrance startled awake when he felt the sudden movement and heard the heavy breathing. He raised his head from the bed pole and scooted closer to his little brother, who was on the verge of tears.

Anthony closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to rid himself of the horrible scene. The fangs only inches from his face... He took a few deep breaths and calmed himself down.

"It was terrible, Terrance! Verne jumped on me and.... and he almost bit my head off. His teeth were so close." Anthony shuddered, imagining it in real life.

"Anthony, that's only in your wild imagination. Verne isn't here to hurt us. I'll keep you safe." Terrance reassured.

Anthony's eyes spilled tears down his rosy cheeks. "What about when you're *not* here?"

Terrance was briefly rattled by that question. But he recovered and sat beside Anthony, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder. "When I'm not here, you'll be all grown up. You won't need me to protect you forever. Someday you'll have your own kids to protect. 'For the Lord your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory.' Deuteronomy 20:4. God will protect you, Anthony, and He will never leave you."

Anthony nodded and wiped away his tears. His brother was, of course, correct. He climbed out of Terrance's bed and descended the stairs. His mother was sitting on the couch and staring out the window, her eyes tired and sad. Anthony plopped beside her and leaned against her shoulder.

"Your father is a brave man, Anthony. Always looking for adventure around the corner. Somehow, he manages to escape the danger that surrounds him like a fog, but he can't stay down forever. Something's bound to happen soon. Too soon." She turned to her son, as if realizing for the first time that he was there. "Why don't you and your brother go outside? It's a beautiful day."

"All right, Mother." Anthony went to the steps, but before going up he called back, "Daddy will come home, Mommy."

He found Terrance laying on his bed and writing in a journal. Anthony laid beside his brother, reading over his shoulder.

*Dearest Mother,*

*Anthony and I are going to follow Verne, the wolf, into the woods. We don't know how far back we'll go, or where we'll end up. But we know that it will be an adventure, and Verne will protect us. And I'll protect Anthony. I promise we'll come home soon as we can, Mom. We love you dearly and we're sorry to leave like this. But we both agreed that it could lead somewhere important. See you soon.*

*Love, Terrance and Anthony*

Terrance folded the note and put it under his pillow, waiting until he could leave it on the kitchen island. Then he turned to Anthony and noticed his wide brown eyes.

"Are we leaving now?" he asked.

"No. We already decided to wait until next week. Besides, you're exhausted enough as it is. You'd fall asleep standing up before you ever made it into the woods."

Anthony flopped onto his back. "In that note you wrote for Mommy, you said that Verne would protect us. Is that really true, Terrance?"

"Yes, Anthony. Perhaps if we hurt him, he won't protect us. Were you planning to hurt him?"

Anthony sat up, indignant. "Of course not! I'd never want to hurt Verne BudWhite!"

"I was only kidding. I know you would never hurt Verne. Neither would I." Terrance sat up and looked out the window.

Anthony laid down again and thought about their leaving. He knew their mother would be deeply saddened by their departure. She would probably read the note and faint or burst into tears, possibly both. But she would trust them and wouldn't try to stop them. That's simply how their mother was, worrisome but trusting.

"Terrance?" Anthony whispered from the bed.

His brother turned to him. "Yes?"

"What if Verne leads us to the Echo Chamber? What if we get trapped there? What if he's bad and he attacks us?"

Terrance laid beside his brother and thought those things over. If Verne led them to the chamber, they'd surely be lost forever. Of course, they'd never escape the dreadful darkness. And if Verne attacked them, well... It would end badly.

"Anthony, listen. Verne won't lead us to the chamber, and he won't attack us. I'll bring my knife though, just in case. We have nothing to worry about. Promise."

"What if we lose sight of Verne while we're following him?"

"Then we'll turn back and go home."

"What if Verne meant for Daddy not to follow him because it was dangerous?"

"You mean if he ran too fast so that Father *couldn't* follow him." Terrance whispered. It wasn't a question. Wherever the wolf lived must be dangerous. Too dangerous for two boys. "Maybe we should rethink going at all."

"What if the warning was to *not* follow him?" Anthony continued with his questions.

Terrance sighed. Then he thought of something to quiet his little brother. Though it had made him cry last time. "Do you want to hear another story?"

Anthony sat up, shaking his head. "It's too scary, Terrance. I'll have more nightmares."

"Nonsense. This one is short." Terrance faced his brother with a solemn expression. "Once, a man in the Echo Chamber saw a light. As he stumbled toward it, he could hear a faint sound echoing across the walls. The light blinded him as he walked ever closer, but the sound remained quiet. When he finally came upon the light, he could hear singing. A song so beautiful it lifted all his worries away. He closed his eyes and laid next to the warm glow. The song lulled him to sleep, and he never opened his eyes again."

Anthony's eyes were wide with fear. He shivered when he heard a howl. Verne's howl. It echoed its way into his brother's room, becoming louder and then softer. But it didn't cease. Anthony plugged his ears and put his face in a pillow. He didn't want to hear the echo or the wolf. He didn't want to leave the safety of his brother's room or his mother's house. When Terrance put his hand upon the boy's back, Anthony relaxed, knowing that the howling had stopped. The horrible sound that unsettled him. Frightened him with its echoing.

"It was only Verne. You're safe." Terrance whispered.

Anthony wrapped his arms tightly around his brother, shivering and scared. He never wanted to let go, to leave this protection. He would likely have died from terror if not for his brother. For Terrance, who was always there with him.

Terrance held his brother tightly, praying that everything would work out in the end. That God would stay with them no matter what

happened.

Anthony heard his brother's final comforting words before falling into a deep sleep. "'And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.' 1 Corinthians 13:13."

+ + +

With their father's return and the theories about Verne, Terrance's hand had been quite forgotten. Mrs. Bones had asked him about it the morning after her husband's leave. They were surprised to discover that it had already healed. There wasn't any evidence that he'd ever been wounded.

Anthony had been waiting for his brother on the little stone steps outside, counting the butterflies that passed him. He shivered in the cool morning air and began wondering if Terrance had abandoned him. He didn't realize his big brother sitting beside him until he heard the echoing of his name. That, of course, frightened him, but he knew it was only Terrance.

"I hate it when you do that," he said.

Terrance only smiled wryly and leaned against the door. Anthony glanced back at him and couldn't prevent the grin from spreading across his face.

He laid his head against the door and closed his eyes. Anthony imagined his father coming home and exclaiming that he'd finally found the Echo Chamber. He made it back like he promised he would. But the next time he came across the chamber, he was lost forever. Nobody ever found him, and his family was left to assume the worst.

He gripped his brother's arm. "Terrance, how will we know if Father falls into the chamber?"

Terrance lifted his head and tried to hide the sadness he knew must be showing in his eyes. When he spoke, it was scarcely above a whisper. "We won't, Anthony."

"But won't God tell us?"

"Not exactly. If Father is gone for a very long time, we'll know what happened to him."

"What?" Anthony asked, tightening his hold on Terrance's arm.

"If Father doesn't return in a few weeks, he'll likely have fallen into the Echo Chamber." Terrance turned his head away from his brother, staring after Verne deep in the woods.

Anthony held onto his big brother's arm for dear life. Would they ever find their father for a proper funeral? Would he be driven insane down there? Blinded by the darkness? It frightened Anthony to

think about such things. He wrapped his arms around his legs and dropped his head onto his knees.

Terrance turned back to his little brother and took a deep, steadying breath. "Don't worry, Anthony. We have our adventure to look forward to. Perhaps Verne will lead us to Father."

"And maybe Daddy will be in the chamber forever. Then Verne will lead us there and we'll never escape."

"'Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.' Luke 21:36. Jesus will be our light in the darkness. He will be our escape, Anthony."

"Why do you trust in God, Terrance?"

"I must trust Him because He is my first and foremost Father. He loves me, so I love Him. He has faith in me and forgives me, I have faith in Him and thank Him. Without God, nothing is right. Without God, I would be nothing."

"But *why* do you have faith in Him?"

"I have faith in Jesus because it allows me to experience stability in the middle of instability. Because He created me, and He knows what is good for me. He will put me on the right path, where I need to be, with the people I need to be with, and He will put people in my life to teach me lessons. We must care for those we love and who love us, and *always* have faith and trust in God." Terrance replied.

Perhaps it was time for Anthony to have that kind of faith, trust, and love. If he knew God like his brother did, his life would be much happier. He'd know that he was never alone. That God's light would penetrate any darkness. That His protection was worth many more times than his brother's. If Anthony trusted the Lord as his brother did, he'd never have to fear anything except Jesus. He would have the freedom he so wanted, and the love he so needed.

+ + +

Anthony was sitting on his bed watching his brother draw a picture of what he thought the Echo Chamber looked like, when their mother called them downstairs. The boys rushed downstairs and found Mrs. Bones on a sofa, her eyes streaming tears. In her hands was a small piece of paper, slightly discolored from dirt. Her hands shook terribly when she handed the note to Terrance.

"Read it aloud. I must know if it's truly as bad as I think." Mrs. Bones whispered, pure sadness in her voice.

Terrance took the note, wondering why it caused his mother so much sorrow. When he read who it was for on the front, he understood perfectly. Written with shaky handwriting it said: *For my dearest wife and boys.* His breath caught in his throat as he stared at his mother with a look of horror. They knew there was only one reason Mr. Bones would be sending them a letter. That's what terrified them both. Anthony looked between them, wondering what this was about.

"What is it, Terrance? What does it say?" he asked.

Anthony's big brother unfolded the letter and read it with a shaking voice. *"My dear family, I know I promised not to go looking for the chamber, and I didn't. But I have found it! Not by any means in a pleasant way, however. One of my men disappeared yesterday. We went looking for him in the woods, and another searching with me fell through the ground. I have no idea how it happened or what's even happening, but I'm certain it's the Echo Chamber. I never thought the Lord would allow me such a victory! 'So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.' 2 Corinthians 4:18. This, I believe, is true of the Echo Chamber as well. We cannot see it, yet it is everlasting. I hope to return home soon. Love, your father and husband."* Terrance closed his eyes as tears trailed down his cheeks and his lips trembled. He looked at the date of the letter through blurred vision and saw it had been written two days ago. Their father had likely fallen prey to the chamber today, if not yesterday. All three of them knew he wouldn't return as he promised. Not unless someone went looking for him...

Anthony turned to Terrance, his eyes wide and pouring tears. "But we can't give up on Daddy! Terrance, somebody will find him! Won't they?" His brother dropped the note on the floor. Anthony shook his brother's arm. "Won't they, Terrance?" he asked again.

Terrance knelt before his little brother and whispered, "No, Anthony, they won't. 'Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.' Isaiah 41:10. The Lord will never leave us, and He will never betray us. With His guidance, we will find Father."

"How will God lead us if we can't see him?"

Terrance smiled. "Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left.' Isaiah 30:21."

Anthony's eyes filled with new tears that flooded down his

cheeks. "What if we can't get out? What if we don't find Daddy? What if we're separated?" his voice was barely audible.

Terrance wrapped his arms around his little brother, all the while whispering, "Have faith, Anthony. Have faith."

+ + +

Anthony awoke before the sun. The window in his brother's room still shone with the moon and stars. He heard Verne's howl, as though he was waiting for the boys to walk out the door and into the forest. Into the Echo Chamber. When Terrance pushed open the door, all but his father was quickly forgotten. They were going to save their father from the chamber that held him captive. Anthony climbed out of bed, already dressed and more than ready for an adventure.

"Before we leave, I must give you a present, Anthony. You must promise to always keep it and to never forget it's meaning. You must always cherish this gift and keep it close to you. Can you do these things for me?" Terrance asked with a solemnness about him.

Anthony nodded, wondering what his brother could possibly be speaking about. Terrance pulled a small but thick book from his supply bag. He pressed it into Anthony's hands. The little book was bound with a dark brown leather, soft to the touch. A faded golden star shone in the middle. And in bright gold letters the title read: *The Holy Bible*. This was Terrance's first Bible, and he was passing it on to his little brother.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And that is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.' Ephesians 2:8. I want you to have this, Anthony, to treasure it. With faith in God and trust of His word, no matter what happens to me, you *will* be safe."

Anthony embraced his brother. "Thank you."

"Come. It's time to leave." Terrance replied, a wide grin on his face as he pulled away.

They descended the stairs together, passing the note sitting pitifully alone on the island, and walked into the chilly morning breeze. Terrance breathed in the cool air, waiting for the wolf to show himself. Anthony stood by his brother, clasping the Bible against his chest. It was the best gift he'd ever been given, and he'd promised Terrance that he would always, *always*, keep it close.

When he saw Verne BudWhite approaching from the forest with an air of regality, Anthony placed his Bible in a small bag his brother had given him. When the wolf was scarcely two feet away, Terrance

held out his left hand. The hand Verne had used as a warning against the very thing the boys were planning. Verne sampled the air, testing it for danger. Then he put his snout against Terrance's hand, a signal of friendship.

Anthony smiled and scratched the wolf behind his ears. He knelt beside him and whispered, "Can you take us to Father?"

Verne howled and pranced into the forest, but not out of sight. Anthony turned to his big brother, waiting for some sort of instruction.

"If we follow Verne, we could get trapped in the Echo Chamber. If you don't want to come with me anymore, then that's perfectly fine. I just.... I don't want anything to happen to you, Anthony." Terrance blinked away tears.

"The Lord is my protector; He is my strong fortress. My God is my protection, and with Him I am safe. He protects me like a shield; He defends me and keeps me safe.' Psalm 18:2. You taught me these things, Terrance. In the end, it will be God's decision."

"Then we must follow Verne and return home with Father."

The boys ran deep into the woods after their wolf guide. They ran after their father. After the legendary Echo Chamber that no living soul had returned from. They prayed they would find their father and prayed for protection. The boys prayed that all would be well in the end.

+ + +

Anthony and Terrance had been walking for hours now, following Verne deeper and deeper into the forest. The sun shone brightly against a pale blue canvas. Soft clouds drifted in the sky, pushed with the wind. And the trees swayed in a gentle locomotion, causing drowsiness to creep up on Anthony.

Terrance had told him they wouldn't stop until night arrived, or until Verne rested. But the day was dragging on and Verne only seemed to go faster and faster. If he kept it up, they'd surely lose sight of him.

"Terrance, can't we take a break?" Anthony asked at last.

"That will only make it take longer. We'll be there by tomorrow, you'll see." His brother answered, keeping an eye on the wolf at all times.

"You don't know that."

"I do, Anthony. There is no *one* entrance to the chamber. Sooner or later, we'll come across a hole we can't see, and we'll fall into it.

There's nothing to it really. We just have to keep up with Verne until that happens."

"That's the trouble. I can't even keep up with you."

At last, Terrance stopped and turned to his little brother, trotting to keep up. He bit his lip, glancing back every now and then to check on Verne's whereabouts. When Anthony caught up to him, he'd made up his mind.

"Get on my back." he said, kneeling while his brother climbed on. When Anthony was secure on Terrance's back, they caught up to Verne and continued the endless journey.

Anthony imagined them walking in the morning and suddenly falling through the solid ground. He thought it was odd that people couldn't see the holes. And he still wondered if Verne had anything to do with the Echo Chamber. Could he, perhaps, see the holes when no one else could? If so, what was it that made him able to? It was all very strange for a boy Anthony's age to experience. He didn't understand half the things that happened in his life, this least of all.

Anthony hadn't noticed the setting sun until Terrance suddenly halted, jolting him from his thoughts. He slid down his brother's back and gazed at Verne, his icy eyes never betraying his thoughts of worry for the boys. They deserved peace, not hysteria.

"Are we stopping?" Anthony asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. We'll find the chamber tomorrow and bring Father home. 'Trust in the Lord with all you heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.' Proverbs 3:5-6. God will take us where we need to be tomorrow, Anthony." Terrance replied.

Anthony nodded and laid beside his brother on the cold ground. Terrance pulled a blanket from his bag and covered himself and his brother with it. Tonight, would be a cold night.

Verne rested his head on his paws and watched the boys closely. He had never wanted anything to happen to them or their father, yet he couldn't prevent what had come and was still to come... He would, of course, try to lead them out of the chamber, but their father was a different story. Peter Bones hadn't meant any harm to the wolf and his chamber, he only meant to find new things. But he had finally passed the line. If he fell into the Echo Chamber it was his own doing. He shouldn't have gone looking for something so dangerous and mysterious. He should've always suspected that he'd fall in, and now he had. Verne BudWhite often wondered why humans did such ridiculous things. He wondered if they knew any better. When his ear

twitched from a sense of danger, Verne pranced into the woods, leaving the boys alone with faith as their only protection.

"Terrance?" Anthony whispered.

"What is it?"

"It's scary out here. I can hear too many sounds echoing. Do you think that means we're close to the chamber?"

Terrance opened his eyes and turned to his little brother. "I think we've always been close to the chamber. And I think you should sleep. Just close your eyes and ignore the sounds."

Anthony did as his brother told him, but he couldn't simply ignore the noises. He heard the owls' hoots, the bats' squeaks, the night bugs scurrying on the ground. He could almost feel them crawling under his back. He could hear all the sounds echoing across the trees and the ground. He was frightened.

"Terrance?"

Terrance sighed. "What, Anthony?"

"I can't sleep because I'm scared. What if we don't find Daddy? What if something terrible has happened to him?" Anthony's eyes widened. When he spoke again, it was hardly a whisper. "What if he's..... dead?"

Terrance placed his hands on his little brother's shoulders, staring deep into his teary brown eyes. "Father is *not* dead, Anthony. He can't be. We'll find him in the chamber, and we'll bring him home. He isn't dead..."

"But you-"

"Anthony!" Terrance snapped, bringing more tears down his brother's rosy cheeks. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to yell. I'm just..... I'm worried for Father too. It frightens me to think of what might have happened to him. I only think of what it will be like when we finally see him and bring him to Mother. When he's finally safe." He wrapped his arms around Anthony.

"I don't like it out here. I want to be with Mommy and Daddy at home. Let's wait on the steps for Father to come back. Please, Terrance, let's go home."

"All right." Terrance held his brother closer. "We'll go home tomorrow. Promise."

Anthony laid beside his brother, safe under the blanket. He closed his eyes and dreamed of home, of protection and warmth. He shuddered to realize that his father may never come home. They were his only hope, yet they were leaving him behind. Anthony wondered what their mother would say when they returned home

tomorrow. Would she scold them? Or would she be happy to see them? Would she be sad that they had left her husband? Or glad that at least her boys were alive? Anthony's mind drifted off to sleep sometime during his questions. His last thought was why he hadn't seen Verne in a while...

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When Anthony opened his eyes, he immediately knew something was wrong. For a forest full of animals, it was too quiet. He was aware that Verne was nowhere to be seen. Aware that the sun was already high in the sky. And aware that his brother was gone... Wait. His brother was *gone*!

Anthony threw the blanket off and stood up. He spun in a circle, looking and listening for Terrance. But there was nothing. He didn't see his big brother anywhere for as far as the eye could perceive. He only saw the quiet and empty forest surrounding him and pressing in on him. He was alone. He was scared. And he was lost.

"TERRANCE!" he called. His voice echoed from tree to tree. "Where are you? We're supposed to go home together. Why did you leave me? You promised! You promised we'd always be together! You.... you abandoned me. Why, Terrance? Please, come back to me. Please."

Anthony sank to his knees, sobbing and waiting. Terrance had left him alone in the treehouse, but he had come back. He'd argued with his little brother, but he had apologized. He had let his little brother sleep with him, always. He had always been there, and now he was gone. He had left his brother in a forest, completely lost and without hope.

Anthony ran blindly into the forest, calling for his brother and praying that he'd be there. He wasn't though, and Anthony knew it. He didn't want to believe that his brother had abandoned him. He didn't want to believe that their father was in the Echo Chamber. Anthony wanted to be with his family at home. Why was everything so confusing?

When the sun disappeared and the moon shone brightly, Anthony gave up at last. His brother surely wouldn't have left without telling him. Something horrible must have happened in the night, while Anthony slept unknowing. He was more alone and more frightened than he had ever been. More scared than that time so long ago in the treehouse.

Anthony curled beside a large tree and cried until he had no

more tears to cry. No more strength to continue on alone. No brother to protect him. He shivered in the coldness of the night, remembering the reason they had gone there to begin with. They had gone to find the chamber. To save their father. Anthony wondered if it was possible for Terrance to have been swallowed up by the ground in his sleep. Was he in the Echo Chamber this very moment? Perhaps he had never intended to leave his little brother after all. Perhaps he was trapped.

Anthony pulled his Bible from the bag his brother had given him. He ran his finger over the golden star and the golden letters. Over the soft brown leather that protected the withered pages. He absently flipped to Psalms and read until he came across Psalm 34:18. It said, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." God didn't seem close to Anthony now, in his despair. He didn't seem to be doing anything at all. Terrance had told him to never give up, to trust God. Anthony had promised that he wouldn't lose faith, but he felt angry. If God was almighty, why didn't He deliver Anthony's brother and father home? Why didn't He show Anthony the way home? A prayer couldn't hurt, and Anthony didn't know what else to do. He held his Bible and bowed his head.

"Lord, if you are truly here with me now, I need you. I need you to guide me and to protect me. To love me and forgive me. Please, Lord, bring my brother and my father home. Deliver us to Mother, that we may live happily. I need you to be with me. I need you more than ever, God. Forgive me for what I have done wrong. For the times I wouldn't listen. Lead me where You need me to be. Amen." Anthony whispered, his body filling with peace and warmth.

He closed his eyes and rested his head against the tree, holding his Bible close. He would never leave it behind. Never forget his promises to Terrance. He would always cherish this gift with love. Anthony's exhaustion found him at last and the boy slumped against the tree.

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Anthony's eyes snapped open when he heard the echo. The echoes of his own breath. The echoes of faraway footsteps. Of his racing heart. He waited for his eyes to adjust, but there was simply no light for them to adjust to. He reached out and stumbled forward until his hand brushed against concrete. Suddenly, Anthony knew where he was. He had become the Echo Chamber's next victim.

"Oh, Terrance. Where are you-are you-you..." his voice echoed,

bringing a great terror and emptiness into the boy's heart.

After a time of leaning against the wall, paralyzed by fear, Anthony decided he had to keep moving. He had to find his brother and father. The trouble was, he couldn't even see his own hand an inch in front of his face.

Anthony slowly walked forward, wary of running face first into a wall. His steps echoed throughout the vast chamber, bouncing from wall to ground to ceiling. He already couldn't see, if this kept up, he'd likely go deaf. He tried taking small steps, but that seemed to somehow enhance the noise. He simply continued walking down some sort of tunnel, going who knew where. It reminded him of a story Terrance had once told him.

"Once you're swallowed up by the ground, it's too late. You're trapped. There's no way of escape. No way to see. And the only sound is your steps, breath, and heartbeat. It drives people over the edge before they even know what's happening or where they are. They're in the Echo Chamber, full of echoes and echoes and echoes..."

He knew what it felt like to be surrounded only by your own breathing and footsteps. It was as though someone was following you, everywhere you went you could hear their breathing and walking. It horrified Anthony. He wondered if, after all this time, his father had gone insane. If his brother would too. For that matter, he wondered if *he* would be driven mad as well.

Still, he went, desperate for a way out. Desperate to see his father again. To hear his brother's gentle voice. To have his family back. To be home. It seemed hopeless, stuck in the dark concrete prison. But there must be a way out. He'd only ever heard one story where the man made it out, but he hadn't been all there. He had forgotten everything except the echoes.

Anthony shivered as he walked along the loud concrete ground, wondering where he would end up. He kept a hand on the wall at all times, reassuring himself that he was *somewhere* and not only surrounded by the darkness that tried to suffocate him. As he was thinking that the tunnel must be the only path in the chamber, his hand slid off the wall. He panicked, frantically feeling for the concrete border. When his hand landed on the comforting wall, he realized it was a corner. His hand had slid off the edge as he'd continued to go on. Anthony simply followed the turn without much thought, allowing the walls of the Echo Chamber to lead him on. All the while, a deep hopelessness growing in the pit of his stomach.

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Anthony followed the turning walls, listening to the echoes of his sobs. He wished his brother was with him. He wished his father was with him. He wished he could be home, sitting in his mother's lap. Most of all, he wished he had never heard of the Echo Chamber. If he'd never heard of its existence, he'd never have been so terribly frightened of it. He wouldn't fear the echoes or the darkness. But Terrance had always told him the scary stories for as long as he could remember.

Anthony's hand brushed against another corner, but this time there was a ledge of concrete where his feet were planted. He stepped up and his foot landed on another ledge. Anthony realized he was walking up a staircase. Perhaps that meant he was getting close to the exit...?

He heard his footsteps echoing along the walls as he walked up, but they were quieter than usual. When his feet were planted upon even ground, Anthony stumbled forward until his hands found a wall. He leaned his back against it and slid to the ground, heart weary and exhausted from walking for hours in the intense blackness.

Anthony absently pulled his Bible from his bag and ran his fingers over the soft leather, remembering when his brother had given it to him. He felt the golden letters, pressed into the cover. Anthony thumbed through the wrinkled pages, opening it halfway.

He wished he could read it through the inky darkness, but there was not even a glimmer of light. There was only concrete and echoes. His breath and steps. Anthony put away his Bible and held a hand against the wall as he resumed his stroll with loneliness and darkness.

He didn't feel any more corners. He didn't go up any more stairs. He simply continued down the long tunnel, wondering if he would ever get out and how long he'd been in the chamber. Was it days, weeks, or months? Were his brother and father even here, or had they left him? *Was anyone* looking for him?

Anthony felt his hand begin to slide down the wall with drowsiness. His eyes drooped, though he couldn't see even with them open. He could hardly hold his head up. Anthony slumped to his knees and laid on the hard ground. But his hand brushed against something very unlike the concrete chamber. He sat up and felt for it again. When his hand found the object, he could tell it was round. There were a few grooves and holes in the object. Two big holes like eyes..... Anthony jumped to his feet and bounded down the hallway.

He kept going, running from the skull. How many more were in here? How many people had entered and never returned? He couldn't prevent the thought from forming in his head. Would he end up like that skeleton?

Anthony put his hand back on the wall and felt a sort of nook in the concrete. A small section cut out like an office cubicle. He sat on his knees, resting his elbows on his legs, and holding his head in his hands. A single tear slid down his cheek as he realized how truly desperate and depressing his situation had become. He was trapped in darkness with nowhere to go and nobody to love him. He let out a sob. Anthony's entire body shook with fear and grief. Despair and a sense of abandonment.

He eventually drifted off, shivering in the coldness of his hidey-hole. He dreamed of Verne BudWhite pushing Terrance through an invisible hole while Anthony slept. Of their father never coming home to hug them and to read the Bible to them. Of his brother leaving without him and never returning... But his sleep was restless. He woke once, forgetting where he was and expecting Terrance to be with him. He broke down in tears when he remembered everything. Losing his brother, father, and himself to the Echo Chamber. It was a nightmare come true.

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Anthony awoke after hours of fitful sleep and horrid nightmares. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, leaning his head against the concrete behind him. His Bible was instantly in his hand, calming his nerves. He opened it, hoping to decipher some of the words. But he couldn't. The blackness was too thick.

Anthony thought about God and the promises he'd made to his brother. He had told Terrance he would never lose his trust, but how could he not? When it was so dark? When everything seemed hopeless? When he was so alone and lost? God was supposed to be his light in the darkness. His foremost Father. The one who loved him no matter what, and who protected him from the demons. Where was He now? Where was He when Anthony needed Him most?

"God, where are you? Why can't I see you with me? Why don't I feel your protective arms?" Anthony muttered, his troubled voice echoing through the chamber. "Please, give me strength to overcome this situation. To find You through all my sorrow. Please, give me endurance to continue ahead. Lord, direct my thoughts, words, and actions, so that I may walk in Your path of peace and love. Please..."

His voice broke. "Please, my Jesus, bring me to You."

Anthony opened his Bible to Deuteronomy. He read until he got to chapter 31 verse 8. He whispered it to himself, "The Lord goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave nor forsake you; do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." He closed his Bible and whispered another a prayer, tears of thanks trailing down his cheeks. When his eyes fluttered open, he realized for the first time that he could see the concrete surrounding him. That there had been a light allowing him to read.

Anthony jumped to his feet and stepped out of his nook. There was a light coming from just beyond the corner. A bluish-white light that shined with warmth. He started walking toward the glow but stopped when he recalled Terrance's story. A man had followed a light once and died. But there had been singing in that tale. Anthony decided he would take his chances. Could this be God's answer to his prayers at last? Was this the way to his brother or father? A way home, perhaps?

When he came around the corner, Anthony's gasp echoed across the concrete. Standing before him was a wolf, but not just any wolf. Glowing and staring at Anthony with icy eyes was Verne. His white fur illuminated and ice blue eyes brighter than ever. He was a more stunningly magnificent creature than Anthony thought possible.

They stared at one another until the boy strutted closer, holding out his hand. Verne placed his muzzle against Anthony's palm and allowed the boy to rumple his perfect coat. Anthony rested his head on the animal's back and wrapped his arms around Verne's neck.

When he trusted his voice he whispered, "Verne, do you remember my brother? Do you know if he's here? Can you take me to him please? I miss Terrance so much. I need him, Verne."

Anthony felt the wolf slip from his embrace. He followed Verne through the chamber. They climbed a staircase, went down tunnels, made sharp turns. The boy stumbled along, running to keep up with his prancing guide. They at last stopped in a square room with only a small entrance. Anthony's heavy breathing bounced from wall to wall. He looked around and saw nothing besides concrete. But surely Verne had led him there for a reason?

He looked back at the wolf, stretching his legs, and resting his head in a corner like he hadn't a worry in the world. Anthony sank to the ground, defeated. He was ready to give up on ever finding his brother or father or escaping the Echo Chamber. His tears splashed

against the ground, sounding like thunder in the small room.

"Anthony-thony-ony?" a voice echoed. It was a voice Anthony had known his entire life. A voice he would recognize from a world away.

Terrance walked into Verne's light and saw his little brother staring at him with flowing tears and a glimmer in his brown eyes. Anthony leapt into his brother's arms, letting all his tears free. And Terrance held him tightly, a few joyful tears spilling down his own cheeks. They stayed like that until Anthony was calm. He looked into his big brother's tired blue eyes and hugged him once more.

"I missed you so much, Terrance. When I woke up alone, I thought you..." Anthony's tears flowed down his face. "I thought you had left me. I was so scared, Terrance. Please don't leave me again."

Terrance brushed Anthony's tears from his rosy cheeks. "I would never, *never*, abandon you, Anthony. I won't ever leave you again. Not ever. I promise you that."

Anthony nodded, still leaning into his brother's embrace. "I still have the Bible you gave me. It's here, in my bag." He pulled it out to show Terrance.

"I'm so proud of you, Anthony. Did you trust God? Or did you lose faith in Him?" Terrance questioned.

Anthony looked up at his brother. "I... I almost lost my faith. I prayed for so many days, Terrance. I was beginning to think that nothing would ever happen, but then God answered me. I asked Him to show me His ways, His path. And He brought you back to me." He closed his eyes and rested his head against his brother's chest. When he spoke, it was in a whisper. "He saved me, Terrance."

Terrance held his little brother near, thanking God and praying for a safe journey home. Watching Verne rest in the corner to provide a light. To provide the Lord's light.

"Anthony, it's time to go home." He gently whispered.

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Anthony gripped his brother's hand tightly as they followed Verne BudWhite through the chamber. They went through tunnel after tunnel. Up staircase after staircase. Corner after corner after corner. The boys simply followed, trusting the wolf's instincts fully. Praying that they would find their father somewhere. That they would finally return home to their mother.

"Anthony, I think Verne *made* the Echo Chamber." Terrance suddenly whispered, watching the splendid animal closely.

"How come?" Anthony asked, tiredness slowly creeping up on the boy.

"Look at how he walks. How he knows exactly when and where to turn. The way he never hesitates before choosing between two tunnels. He knows where he's going. And he is the only one who can see the entrances and find the exits."

"But how could a wolf make this place?"

"I'm not sure. I just *know* he did."

As Anthony was about to ask his brother how it was that he knew Verne had created the chamber, he tripped. He thrust his hands out to catch himself and they landed on something strange. Something he had only felt once before. Anthony screamed and began running down the tunnel, but Terrance wrapped him in his arms.

"Anthony, it was only a few bones. There's nothing to be afraid of. All right?"

"No, Terrance! There's the darkness and the echoes! We're trapped in here and Father is gone! What if we come across *his* skeleton, Terrance? What then?"

"We pray, Anthony."

"Right now?"

Terrance smiled. "Always." Then he bowed his head and held his brother closer. "'Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; on You I wait all the day.' Psalms 25:4-5. Guide us home, my dear Jesus."

"Amen." Anthony whispered.

When the boys heard Verne's echoing howl, they raced down the tunnel to catch up. They found the wolf prancing around a small hole surrounded by darkness. It looked like an ominous hobbit hole. Anthony let his brother's hand go and knelt before Verne BudWhite.

"Is this the way? Is Daddy in there?" he asked. The wolf seemed to shake his head. "Then what? Where does it lead?" Verne bounded through the hole without another glance.

Terrance sat beside his little brother. "I suppose we better follow him."

"Even if it leads to our deaths?" Anthony questioned.

"Anthony, listen. We must trust God in times of distress and times of hopelessness. We must follow His lead no matter where it takes us. We must never question God's power and guidance. But above all, we must always love Him. Do you understand?"

Anthony nodded; it wasn't the Lord's guidance he worried over.

"What if we never see Daddy again, Terrance?"

Terrance bit his lip. "Please, don't talk like that. Of course we'll see Father again."

"You always say things like that! But you don't know! You can't know if we'll ever see Daddy again! If we'll even ever make it home. You don't know if we'll always be together. You don't even know if Mother still loves us after running away..." Anthony's voice trailed off as he closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around himself.

"Anthony, I don't need to know those things because God knows them. When He decides we should know them and see for ourselves, we will. If we believe in God, then He'll show us all we need to know."

"Terrance, I'm so sorry. It's just that... that I'm scared of losing you again. And of never seeing Father again. And never seeing Mommy again. I missed you so much. And I still miss Mom and Dad." Anthony looked at his brother with teary eyes. "What if we go through that tunnel and I lose everything again?"

"That won't happen. 'But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.' 1 Peter 5:10."

"I-"

"Hush." Terrance whispered. "Come with me, Anthony. And we'll be together. Always. In faith and in truth."

Anthony grinned. It was what he'd said when they had first argued, but gentler. He remembered all the promises he had made to his brother. It seemed as though years had passed since then.

"Okay, Terrance. I'll follow you."

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He crawled through the endless tunnel, waiting to see the exit or Verne waiting for them. Anthony stayed two inches behind his brother, assuring himself that he would never lose Terrance again. Their breaths and scuffling echoed in the narrow tunnel. Anthony was beginning to doubt an end to the long pathway when a spot of light appeared ahead of them. He sensed Terrance speeding up and he adjusted his speed to keep up. The circle of light grew until they both tumbled out of the tunnel.

They rolled down a slope and found themselves in the middle of a forest. The trees waving their greetings and the sun smiling down on them. The gentle breeze gliding over the boys and the sky brilliant as ever. They simply laid there for a time, taking in their surroundings. Breathing in the freedom.

They both sat up upon hearing Verne's howl. He stared at them for a moment, his ice blue eyes looking deep within their souls. His fur swishing in the wind. He nodded at the boys and pranced away. He was satisfied with the way things had turned out. The boys had found each other and escaped the chamber. His heart was happy for them. He wished everyone could feel that way about one another...

Anthony stood up, turning in circles and gazing at the forest. "Is this *our* forest, Terrance?"

"It looks similar, but I suppose all forests look similar." He faced the opposite direction Verne had gone. "This way."

Anthony caught up with his big brother and held onto his arm. He slipped his other hand in his bag and patted his Bible. The one thing that had helped him through the Echo Chamber. The one thing that would help him through the remainder of his life. God's Word and his faith in Jesus.

As they walked, Anthony became aware of how tired and hungry he was. He hadn't eaten anything while he'd been trapped. None of his rest had actually been restful. Anthony's feet began to drag as he followed his brother.

"Terrance, can we take a break?" he asked.

Terrance glanced at his little brother and stopped. "Of course."

Anthony practically collapsed against a tree; his legs tired from walking for so many long hours. He curled against the tree and shut his eyes. Terrance smiled and covered him with the blanket from his bag. He laid beside his brother and fell fast asleep.

Anthony's eyes opened wide when he heard a snapping sound. He shook Terrance awake and stood up. He searched in every direction but saw nothing. No animal, human, or anything. He plopped against the tree again.

"What is it, Anthony?" Terrance asked, pushing himself up.

"I heard a branch snap. I think something's over there." He pointed in the direction they'd been going.

"I don't think so." Terrance stood and pulled up his brother. "Come on. Let's get home."

Anthony nodded and walked with his big brother. They never heard the noise again. In fact, the sound was quite forgotten when they saw something in the distance. A dark blue house with white trim and a black shingled roof. It was *their* house! They were home at last!

The boys ran toward their house and flung open the door. They quietly walked into the living room where they knew their mother

would be. Her auburn hair was tied in a knot atop her head. Her hands trembled, grasping the note Terrance had left on the island. Nora Bones was staring out the window when Anthony grabbed her hand. The note fell to the floor as she swung her son around, hugging him and crying tears of joy. Terrance embraced his mother and cried on her shoulder. Her boys were home!

She knelt beside them and smiled wide, her eyes still streaming. "My boys, how I've missed you." She kissed their foreheads.

"Mother, isn't Father here?" Terrance questioned.

Mrs. Bones straightened up. "Come upstairs with me," she said.

Anthony followed his brother and mother up the steps, wondering what they would see. Their father? Nothing at all? Verne BudWhite? When she led them through her bedroom door, they understood.

Peter Bones was alive, but he was injured. His right arm was bandaged with a sling holding it across his chest. His right foot wore a boot for a sprained ankle. It looked as if he'd fallen and landed hard on his right side. Despite his wounds and the pain he was surely in, he grinned when his boys climbed on the bed and hugged him.

He wrapped his good arm around his boys and wife and whispered, "'For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' Matthew 6:21. My boys and my love, you are my treasure."

THE END

# How Mighty is God?

Anthony and Terrence are enjoying an ordinary day in their humble home, when they discover their father has gone looking for the Echo Chamber. The place that nobody has ever returned from...

They make plans to go after him and bring him home. But something terrible happens along the way... Anthony promised his brother he would never lose his faith in God, but he begins to. He wonders how someone he can't see can possibly be everything his brother says He is. Will Anthony find his faith and bring his father home? Or will he lose himself and his trust in God?